

# TENNESSEE FOLKLORE SOCIETY BULLETIN

## Contents

The Folk Celebrates a Centennial . . .	p. 1
Picturesque Speech . . . . .	p. 10
Notes and Comments . . . . .	p. 11

---

VOLUME X

NUMBER II

June, 1944

THE FOLK CELEBRATES  
A CENTENNIAL

By George Pullen Jackson

Just a hundred years ago the editor of a weekly newspaper in Harris County, Georgia, laid a bulky manuscript in his valise and took the train for Philadelphia in search of a publisher. The search was successful. The book appeared promptly. And this war year of 1944 thousands upon thousands of Southerners of the sturdy yeoman type will take a comparatively new edition of this same book under their arms and wend their way to country churches or county court houses, or take the train for farther-off cities where they will celebrate its hundredth birthday.

The author of the book was Benjamin Franklin White. For many years he had, along with his editorial work on "The Organ," (Hamilton, Ga.) taught singing schools zealously in the countryside roundabout. And this activity explains the book which Collins printed for him in Philadelphia. It was a book of songs: those which White had taught from current manuals like "The Missouri Harmony" and "The Kentucky Harmony," and the "unwritten" songs he had heard and himself sung in Primitive Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian gatherings and in all-denominational revivals and camp meetings. Many of these latter sorts he had published singly and from

time to time in his newspaper. He gave the collection the name "The Sacred Harp."

### A Tome of Folklore Plus

Why write here about an old book of religious song? Simply because "The Sacred Harp" was and still is folk song. This has been abundantly proved and generally recognized. The proof and recognition touch chiefly its tunes, however. Hundreds of these have been identified as folk melodies once associated in the main with ancient worldly texts, notably those which Professor Child stripped of their music and presented as poetry. The story of the adoption of these tunes by early American religious groups in making their "unwritten" music has also been told. And it was this body of song which White rescued from oblivion and thus earned the distinction of being one of America's first folklorists.

"The Sacred Harp" is not all folk music, to be sure. It is all folky, however. Between its covers are scores of "fuguing" tunes and anthems which are compositions of known authorship from the latter part of the eighteenth century. And despite their simplicity, age, and persistent popularity with country singers, they should not be considered as folk song any more than are Stephen Foster's ditties.

A non-folk feature of all the tunes is that they are harmonized. Their three- and four-part vestments are interesting in themselves; but they are actually harmful, in

performance, to the one-line beauty of the melodies and often almost obscure it. And of course harmony as such, whether of this older brand or of the modern concert-inspired sort, is foreign to the untampered-with folk singer.

Nor are the Sacred Harp texts all folk-made. They run all the way from the simplest of repetitive-cumulative stanza series - "communally" composed without a doubt - through the hymns of honest Isaac Watts and emotional John Newton to the poems of such as Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College some 150 years ago. By and large however the song texts are, if not folk-made, still a folk-selected anthology; and very few of them appear in the urban hymnals of today.

#### One Hundred Hard Years

"The Sacred Harp" has not had an easy life in any sense. It has lived through four wars and is now standing the shocks of a fifth. The shakeup of the War Between the States brought the Sacred Harp folk face to face with problems of modernization. Its notation was especially embarrassing to those among its singers who would keep up with the musical Joneses. It was the four-shape notation invented in up-state New York in 1798 to visualize the four different notes, fa, sol, la, and mi, of ancient English usage, a system to which American country singers had generally adhered. But the Joneses had begun singing do, re, mi, a newly imported manner from continental Europe; and they had presented this on the staff in



seven shapes or even in "roundhead" characters. Large sections of Sacred Harp singers refused, however, to give up their ancestral tonal language. They still refuse. And today every song, whether it is being learned or being performed in conventions is sung first once through in fa-sol-la. Nowhere else among English-speaking peoples (thus also in the world) has this practice been preserved.

And the old-timey songs which White had selected thirty years before were becoming distasteful to the musical leftists of seventy-odd years ago. But here, too, conservative judgment prevailed. Only a few of the original songs were left out of the 1869 edition. Every new edition - there have been five in the straight line of succession and the somewhat tangent Cooper edition - brought a new grist of old and new songs which were presented in a new "Supplement," leaving the original part (262 pages) comparatively unchanged. The most recent edition, however, has deleted a rather large number of the earliest pieces and substituted others on their traditional pages.

Still another condition has made life hard for "The Sacred Harp" and its singers. "Art" music with all its ramifications and seductions and "popular" music of momentary attraction have done their best to kill it. The proponents of Better Music, instead of looking on this modest and changeless folk tradition as something basic, like the older aspects of our language, clothes, house-building and furniture-making,

have despised it as something to be cast out. Naturally these forces, ubiquitous and persistent, have reduced its life expectancy. Its singers thus find their remaining sanctuaries chiefly in the more remote sections where ignorant (I use the adjective without animus) and unsympathetic minions of city culture, whether in church or in school, are less insistent.

### The Singin'est Year

Fortunately, perhaps, the rank and file of our country folk look neither forward nor backward very far. So they have made up their minds to have a great time this year. Their plans are necessarily of no great compass. There will be no one big nation-wide meeting. Sacred Harp singers are individualistic, democratic to the nth degree and thus separatistic to a fault. The only binding forces are the book, their singing zeal, and that religious fundamentalism which pervades the activity. So the centennial means primarily a 12-months' spurt in singing. It is chiefly the annual conventions that will swell. The two-day meeting of the United Sacred Harp Musical Association in Atlanta will stretch to three days. (These gatherings begin on a Friday or a Saturday and always end on a Sunday afternoon.) Other similarly enlarged singings will be held in Birmingham (Alabama Sacred Harp Singing Convention) and in a Texas city (Texas Interstate Sacred Harp Musical Association). In Georgia they are planning also an elaborate

gathering on the spot (if they can find it) where the Sacred Harp was first laid before a singing group a hundred years ago. The grandchildren and great-grandchildren of B. F. White - many of them zealous singers of the old songs - are planning this event.

#### The Wind-up at Double Springs

Perhaps the most ambitious celebration and one of the season's last will be held in Double Springs, Winston County, Alabama, in the midst of one of the singin'est sections of the South, on the fourth Sunday in September and THE ENTIRE WEEK before. There will be sessions morning, afternoon and evening. One morning will be given over to the numerous Denson clan. Some two score members of this notable Sacred Harp-singing, -teaching, and -composing family will render an extensive group of songs, largely from "The Sacred Harp," composed by five generations covering the entire 100 years since James Denson's "Christmas Anthem" came out in the 1844 edition. And on the same occasion a monument to the memory of "Uncle Tom" Denson and his brother "Uncle Scab" - who were outstanding personalities in the song movement from shortly after the War Between the States to the time of their death a few years ago - will be unveiled on the Double Springs court house square.

#### A Look Toward 2044

This will be a joyous music year for lovers of the Sacred Harp. But what is coming? Will it go down hill? Yes,

probably, slowly. It has the defects of its qualities. It is a non-commercialized and all but non-institutionalized undertaking at a time every cause seems to need an organized pressure group behind it. It is bound up with the old-time personal-emotional religion when majority church practice has become all but completely urban-socialized. It is a neighborly group-singing activity when singing has given way to listening inactivity and neighbors are becoming extinct. And it is old-time music when attractive new tonal toys are made and beamed to us on round-the-clock shifts.

The Sacred Harp may persist another century. But it will be a wonder if it does.



## BOOK REVIEW

White and Negro Spirituals: George Pullen Jackson; J.J. Augustin,  
New York City, \$5.50.

The fourth and latest of Dr. Jackson's books on spirituals deals with two main problems: first, that of the origin of American religious folksong; second, the relationship between the white and negro varieties.

The first half of the book is devoted to the first of these problems. In the introduction Dr. Jackson describes his method of ferreting out origins: since the conventional records of the eighteenth century gave him no clue, he searched among "the despised religious groups" and found what he was looking for in their song-books and chronicles. The white spirituals, he proves, arose from the dissenting religious sects - the Baptists, Shakers, Methodists, Millerites - and received extra impetus from the camp-meeting fad which began about the turn of the nineteenth century.

The second part begins with a brief survey of negro song literature in publication. This is followed by a "Comparative Tune List" in which 116 melodies of white spirituals are paired with an equal number of negro variants. The rest of the book is concerned with the proof that the white man's songs went over to the negro and not vice versa.

The book closes with a complete set of appendices,

including one of "wandering" rhyme pairs (couplets that were apt to turn up almost anywhere), and another of favorite choruses of early nineteenth-century revival spirituals.

White and Negro Spirituals contains a wealth of material. The quoted texts alone would delight any student of the more curious aspects of religious thought in America. The tunes are invaluable; fortunately they are quoted intact. There is also an all too short discussion of the ornamentation of tunes in actual singing, together with a full transcription of one tune in its skeleton and ornamented forms. This reviewer, for one, would like to know more about this ornamentation. Is there any particular plan to it as there is in, say, American swing music or Hungarian folk music?

All in all, this is a fascinating book and required reading for any folklorist. One beauty of Dr. Jackson's works is that they keep on going; thus Spiritual Folksongs grew naturally out of White Spirituals, and Down-East Spirituals was obviously the next step after Spiritual Folksongs. We await the successor to White and Negro Spirituals with eagerness.

D. H.

## PICTURESQUE SPEECH

Roland D. Carter, of the University of Chattanooga, sends the following:

"One afternoon some friends asked me to drive with them out in the country to visit one of the family aunts. On the way one of the nieces commented on the rapid-fire and continuous-talking 'ability' of the aunt.

"When we drove up to the front gate, a lady, drying her hands on her checked apron, came toward us from the porch. The niece seeing her announced excitedly, 'There comes Aunt Molly now, a-talking two rows at a time!'"

\* \* \*

The wife of a retired minister in Maryville was house-cleaning with the dubious help of a new negro maid. As the girl removed a picture of Christ from the wall, she looked at the face earnestly for a moment, and then inquired brightly, "Some of your folks?"

\* \* \*

Miss Nathalia Wright, in connection with some research on Lanier in the Montvale district, came across an old farmer who referred to a "building house" that had stood near there at one time. At first she thought that this term was merely redundant, but later, on reflecting on the common usage of "church house" and "mansion house," she came to the conclusion that he was speaking of an ordinary dwelling as contrasted with the two other terms above. Is this deduction correct?

TENNESSEE FOLKLORE SOCIETY BULLETIN  
Volume X                      Number 2                      June, 1944  
Published four times a year by the Tennessee Folklore Society

President

Susan B. Riley, Nashville

Vice-Presidents

Neal Frazier, Murfreesboro

Paul M. Fink, Jonesboro

Treasurer

T. J. Farr, Cookeville

Secretary and Editor of the Bulletin

Dorothy Horne, Maryville

Membership fee and subscription to the Bulletin, one dollar  
a year.

---

NOTES AND COMMENTS

The author of the leading article needs no introduction to folklorists. Dr. George Pullen Jackson is a pioneer in the study of white spirituals and shape-note singing, and is generally acknowledged to be the outstanding authority on these subjects. His first three books, White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands, Spiritual Folksongs of Early America, and Down-East Spirituals and Others, are already classics; the fourth, reviewed in this issue, is a worthy successor.

Dr. Jackson has served as president of the TFS and has contributed from time to time to the Bulletin. We are indeed fortunate to have this article from him.



\* \* \*

Near the mouth of Abram's Creek, on the Calderwood road, is a large stone with curious red markings. A small boy volunteered the information that these were blood stains, and that they had been made back in the early days when a little boy cut off the head of an Indian there. Mrs. Whitehead in the neighborhood corroborated this story but could add nothing to it. Can anyone supply the details?

\* \* \*

Another exchange publication has been received from the American Antiquarian Society. This is the Proceedings at the Semi-annual Meeting Held in Boston, April 21, 1943. Besides the various reports the volume contains the following papers:

Francis Wayland, a Neglected Pioneer of Higher Education  
.....William G. Roelker

John Farmer's First American Journey, 1711-1714  
.....Henry J. Cadbury

The Autobiographical Memoranda of John Brock, 1636-1659  
.....Clifford K. Shipton

This volume, like our other exchange publications, is available to TFS members upon request.